

Key water hearing looms

Bakersfield, CA
(Kern Co.)
Californian
(Cir. D. 75,200)
(Cir. S. 90,000)

APR 26 1998

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888



Stu Pyle

Water is big news again with the release of the CALFED Bay-Delta Program report in March. After public review, decisions will be made this year that will control how California's water is managed for years to come. The issue is how to "fix the Delta" with both water management programs and physical structures to improve conditions for fish, as well as allow greater reliability for water originating from the Delta.

With El Niño-driven precipitation surging past the 106-year record for Kern County, it is hard to remember the six-year drought that ended in 1992; or that nearly all the cities and farms in California depend on water supplies transported from distant sources. In fact, the Bay-Delta is the source of drinking water for two-thirds of the state, agricultural water for much of its \$24 billion farm economy and is also home to a variety of plants and animals cherished by the people of this state.

Kern County's water future is tied to what happens in the Delta. Local water leaders struggled in the early 1960s to support the State Water Project and to locally finance our 25 percent share of the project. Thousands have labored over three decades using that water to build an outstanding agricultural sector. We have also stabilized our urban and ground water supplies.

There was disappointment in 1982 when voters statewide failed to ratify legislation that would have authorized completion of the State Water Project including a "peripheral canal" in the Delta. Recently, water has been taken from export use to create conditions in the Bay-Delta thought to be needed for survival of threatened and endangered fish. As a result, project water users can now experience shortages in seven out of 10 years.

This situation affects the entire state. In 1996, Gov. Pete Wilson joined with federal water and natural resources management agencies to form a cooperative effort called the CALFED Bay-Delta Program. Technical experts from state and federal agencies, along with a federally chartered public advisory committee, have worked out the elements of a Bay-Delta solution. People with environmental, urban and agricultural interests in the Bay-Delta were asked to help develop a consensus solution — one that reduces conflicts and is equitable, long-lasting and affordable. The solution must assure that improvements for one part cannot worsen conditions for another. All sectors must get better together.

Public input throughout the program has been intense and there needs to be public input during the remainder of this year.

The CALFED Bay-Delta Program draft released on March 16 is a programmatic environmental impact statement (state) / environmental impact report (federal) which identifies three potential Bay-Delta solutions. These alternatives are much broader than traditional water plans based on just dams, canals and pumps. The Bay-Delta solution alternatives include:

- Water use efficiency programs statewide to reduce the amount of water cities and farms need to take from the Delta. Four times more water is envisioned from water conservation than from new storage.
- Ecosystem restoration, land use and water management programs in the Delta and its watershed to improve habitat. It has been started with Proposition

204 funds approved in 1996 and will go on for 20 years with costs running into billions of dollars.

- Watershed management.
- Levee system rebuilding to protect Delta farm lands and prevent salt water from entering the Delta interior.
- Water transfers as a way to redistribute water already developed.
- Water quality improvements to protect water for use in the Delta and for exported drinking water.

The most difficult decisions relate to how to move water through the Delta for export and how to control flows for fish protection. The plans also include storage for the system to actually increase the amount of water available for all uses. Three alternatives have resulted from looking at dozens of ways.

Alternative 1 — The Existing System Conveyance Alternative, would make minor changes in Delta channels.

Alternative 2 — The Modified Through Delta Conveyance Alternative, continues to move water for export through existing but improved Delta channels with the addition of fish screens.

Alternative 3 — The Dual Delta Conveyance Alternative is similar to Alternative 2, except that it adds a new channel around the east side of the Delta.

The solutions range in cost from \$10.5 to \$12 billion, and all of them propose increases in water storage.

The issue for Kern County is to find the solution that best meets the needs of the Delta environment, provides some improvement and reliability to our water supplies, and does it at a cost that does not drive our farmers out of business.

Oh, yes, it should be a solution that all of the interests can agree to. Bay area environmentalists have already called Alternative 3 a rerun of the 1982 Peripheral Canal plan. The new isolated CALFED channel is smaller and would be operated to improve water quality for fish habitat and for drinking water. Its minor addition to project water supply would come from flexibility in not having to stop pumping at critical times to avoid fish losses.

For Kern County, we do not yet know if the water supply reliability benefits of the isolated canal will offset its increased costs. What seems to be developing is a contest between environmentalists, who want to see more and more water dedicated to fish flows, and the 20 million people who depend on the Delta for high quality drinking water. While our mainly agricultural water use could get along with Alternative 2, we may find that consensuses would lead to supporting the plan that serves the drinking water needs for export water even with higher costs.

One more thing needs to be said. This is not a plan about how to guarantee water for the 45 million people expected to live in California in the year 2020. Even after everything possible is done to protect the Delta and its current level of water supply capability, there will still be a 3 million acre foot shortfall between supplies and water needs 20 years from now. The final step toward our water future, however, is to fix the Delta.

A hearing on the CALFED Bay-Delta Program EIR/EIS will be held in Bakersfield on April 29 at the Kern Agricultural Pavilion at 501 S. Mount Vernon Ave. The staff will be on hand beginning at 6 p.m. to discuss the program with early comers, and the formal hearing will begin at 7 p.m. Organizations and individuals can make verbal comments at the hearing. June 1 is the deadline for written comments to be considered in finalizing the EIR/EIS.

Stu Pyle is the retired engineer-manager of the Kern County Water Agency. He is a member of the Bay-Delta Advisory Council.